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SUBJECT An Interview with Senator Birch Bayh

TOM BROKAW: It's 7:11 now. Lots of questions being raised these days about United States' intelligence as a result of what happened to us in Iran and in Afghanistan. Among other things, the questions involve what we should be doing about future intelligence activities, whether this is a good step forward for the CIA now, whether people will begin once again to take it more seriously.

Standing by in Washington with Bob Abernethy this morning is Senator Birch Bayh. He's Chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee. And they are kind of overseers of the CIA.

Gentlemen, good morning.

BOB ABERNETHY: Good morning, Tom. Welcome, Senator.

On a scale of one to ten, how would you rate the quality of the information we're now getting from Southwest Asia?

SENATOR BIRCH BAYH: It depends on what kind of information. Some of it I'd rate 10-plus, and some of it much lower.

ABERNETHY: Well, for instance, it's been reported that the CIA estimated about 15,000 Soviet troops in a position to invade Afghanistan. In fact, the invasion force turned out to be around 50,000; now up to around 100,000. I don't know whether that's true. But if it's true, how would you explain that?

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SENATOR BAYH: Well first of all, I explain it by saying I don't think I want to get into a position of trying to degrade certain publications' news sources, but they better take a look at sources. Because I had been briefed, members of the Intelligence Committee had been briefed over a significant period of time. We did know that the Soviets were massing troops on the Afghan border. We've known that for some time. I don't think anybody at the Pentagon or anybody at the State Department was surprised about the size of the force. We knew the force was there. We could be relatively sure of what was there. We didn't know what was in the minds of the people as to when and where they were going to use this force.

ABERNETHY: Knew the capacity, but didn't know the intention.

SENATOR BAYH: That's accurate.

ABERNETHY: What about -- what about in Iran with the students there in the Embassy? Is it realistic to think that we should have known that they might be about to take hostages at the Embassy?

SENATOR BAYH: I think we should have known that. I think we have to look at the Iranian situation and distinguish it from the Afghan situation. There was a policy decision made back in the late '60s, early '70s when we decided that we were going to base all of our influence, the whole ball game on the Shah, that we were really going to denigrate our intelligence collection efforts, that we weren't going to....

ABERNETHY: Take our information from him.

SENATOR BAYH: Yes. We weren't going to try to infiltrate the groups, because SAVAK would find out and we would pique the Shah, and thus he would not....

ABERNETHY: But the Shah was overthrown last February. Do you think we should have known more than we knew about what the students were going to do?

SENATOR BAYH: Well, it takes a while. Once you've caught off a source of information and have refused to take advantage of the capabilities that our intelligence collection system has, it takes a good while to develop credible sources again within a country.

ABERNETHY: Let me take you back to Afghanistan. The Soviets set up a regime friendly to them there a year or more ago. And since then there have been people opposed to that regime.

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Can you say whether we have in any way been trying to help them?

SENATOR BAYH: Well, I think I can say that when significant numbers of people in Afghanistan were determined to try to assert themselves and to try to have some say in what kind of government Afghanistan should have and not have it imposed on them by the Soviets, that we did take certain steps to help them do what any group of citizens should be able to do in a country.

ABERNETHY: A lot of people in Washington, as you know, think that there's been a significant change here in the last few....

SENATOR BAYH: I don't want to -- let's not double-talk. I don't think you would expect me, or your viewers wouldn't expect me to lay it all out.

ABERNETHY: Of course not.

SENATOR BAYH: And so I don't want it to look like we're just double-talking.

ABERNETHY: Yes, but we're trying to get -- we're trying to get some sense of your sense of what the reality is, about what we know and what we can do.

SENATOR BAYH: Yes. Frankly, my own personal opinion is that, you know, I don't like to see the Soviet Union sending in troops. I don't like to see them installing puppets. And whenever we can assist people to do the kinds of things that people ought to have the right to do, frankly, I think we ought to do that.

ABERNETHY: Okay. That gets precisely to the question I wanted to ask you. I think a lot of people think there's been a kind of change in this town in the last couple of weeks, a greater willingness to use force. Does that extend, do you think, to a new willingness to approve secret operations by the CIA?

SENATOR BAYH: Well, Bob, I think it's important to understand that there is no law prohibiting secret operations. There has been a set of rules established first by President Ford, and reinforced and strengthened by President Carter, working with the intelligence committees of the Senate and the House, in which if you're going to do this kind of thing, you check it out with Congress. And that is what has been done. And I think that's what should be done.

ABERNETHY: But are you satisfied that if it seemed

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in our national interest to try to mount some kind of secret operation in Southwest Asia, that we have the capacity, the ability to do so?

SENATOR BAYH: Yes, I think so. And certainly Congress has not been a roadblock in that regard.

ABERNETHY: Tom has a question.

BROKAW: A question, couple of questions, Senator, first of all about the basing of American spy planes in Egypt. Is that a given fact now? We've been hearing reports out of there about joint exercises, and so on? Do we expect to have more American planes based in Egypt for over-flights of Afghanistan and so on?

SENATOR BAYH: Tom, I'd rather not talk about specific bases. I think we have ample capacity to base our planes, to collect the kind of information we need.

BROKAW: Do you think that the President has been tough enough in his response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan?

SENATOR BAYH: I think so.

BROKAW: What about the political effect of all of this on Iowa next week? I know you keep a close ear to the political rumblings around the country. What do you think the effect of this will be on the President's drive for renomination, especially against your friend and Senate colleague, Senator Kennedy?

SENATOR BAYH: Well, I have a couple of friends, maybe three, running for President in Iowa. So please don't get me involved in that. I think what the President did was rather courageous, whether you agree with his posture or not. And I have real concerns about the use of grain in the way it was used. But that's been done. And we have to, it seems to me, react in a way that's going to minimize, if not totally relieve, the hardship on the farmers.

I don't know what impact that's going to have on Iowa. One of the things that I'm concerned about is that a situation like Afghanistan, particularly in the business that we're involved in, the crazy business of collecting intelligence, I think it's important for us to have good intelligence, to have the best intelligence system it's possible for us to develop. And we're good at it. Our people in the intelligence business are experts. And I don't want to see that kind of thing drug into the political arena. I don't think that's the kind of thing -- who is elected, who is nominated, who wins in those caucuses in Iowa -- is nearly as important to me as doing what

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we can to provide more resources and the right kind of resources so that the President, whoever he might be, has an even better intelligence system next year than he has now.

BROKAW: But if I can in the closing seconds here, Bob, get back here to the grain situation, Senator Kennedy is opposed to the grain embargo; President Carter is in favor of it. Where do you stand, one side or the other?

SENATOR BAYH: I'm concerned about embargoes. I want to see what kind of proof we have that the other grain producing nations will cooperate with us. If they don't, they can "backdoor" us to death.

ABERNETHY: One quick question, Senator. Are you satisfied that if we wanted to send weapons some way, through some way, through some channel to the people remaining, who are fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan, that we could so?

SENATOR BAYH: No question about it.

ABERNETHY: Thank you very much.

Tom?

BROKAW: That's the kind of answer we've been looking for, at least in terms of length, for some time from Washington.

SENATOR BAYH: It's hard to get that kind from me.

BROKAW: Nineteen past the hour now.